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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was threefold. First, to investigate the strategies adolescents use to coordinate conflicting social and academic goals in situations where these conflicting goals varied in urgency. Second, to examine the importance of social versus academic goals in such situations, and third, to examine the effects of gender and academic achievement on strategy choices and goal importance. Senior high school students (n=51) were required to indicate the strategies they would use to solve four hypothetical dilemmas involving conflicts between an academic goal (completing an assignment) and a social goal (going to a party). Some of these students (n=20) were also interviewed. Results revealed that students chose strategies that allowed them to fulfill both goals. They perceived social goals to be more important than academic goals. The urgency of the academic goal, rather than the urgency of the social goal, affected the types of strategies students would choose, as well as students' perceptions of how important the two goals were. These results were not influenced by academic achievement, and only minimally influenced by gender. (Contains 15 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Coordinating Social and Academic Goals

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was threefold. Firstly, to investigate the strategies adolescents use to coordinate conflicting social and academic goals in situations where these conflicting goals varied in urgency. Secondly, to examine the importance of social versus academic goals in such situations. Thirdly, to examine the effects of gender and academic achievement on strategy choices and goal importance. Senior high school students (n=151) were required to indicate the strategies they would use to solve four hypothetical dilemmas involving conflicts between an academic goal (completing an assignment) and a social goal (going to a party.) A sample of these students (n=20) were also interviewed. Results revealed that students chose strategies that allowed them to fulfill both goals. They perceived social goals to be more important than academic ones. The urgency of the academic goal, rather than the urgency of the social goal, affected the types of strategies students would choose, as well as student's perceptions of how important the two goals were. These results were not influenced by academic achievement, and only minimally influenced by gender.

There has been a growing appreciation amongst motivational theorists that the goals associated with academic achievement are embedded within a wider social context, where a different set of associated goals may interact with academic goals (e.g. Urdan & Maehr, 1995). Recent research has demonstrated the influence of social goals on a variety on academic and non-academic outcomes (e.g. Lai, 1997, Townsend & Hicks, 1997, Wentzel, 1996). This has prompted researchers to examine students' pursuit and coordination of academic and social goals (e.g. Urdan & Maehr, 1995, Wentzel, 1989)

Dodge et al (1989) proposed that there are five common strategies to coordinate multiple goals. Although these researchers focused primarily on the coordination of social goals, they conceptualized social competence as the coordination of various goals in a particular situation, the management of goal conflicts, and the reconciliation of multiple goals. This suggests that goal coordination extends beyond the social domain and is required across, as well as within domains of activity (Hicks, 1992).

The first strategy proposed by Dodge et al (1989) is the 'single integrative strategy', whereby individuals employ a single strategy that will satisfy several goals simultaneously without having to modify or abandon any goals. The second strategy is the 'multiple simultaneous strategy', where people employ several strategies more or less simultaneously in order to pursue multiple goals in the same situation. The third strategy, 'deferring goals' strategy, is where individuals pursue one goal at a time by focusing on immediate goals and deferring others.

The fourth strategy is the 'modifying goals' strategy whereby a person reconciles multiple goals by modifying one or more of the goals. This can also include altering the criteria for considering the goals satisfied. The final strategy is the 'generalising from specific subgoals' strategy which involves identifying the higher order needs that the goal is intended to serve and finding other goals which serve the same purposes. Dodge et al's (1989) strategies for coordinating multiple goals are theoretical and have yet to be examined empirically.

The strategies used to coordinate goals cannot be examined independently from the goals themselves, as a person chooses *what* goals to pursue, as well as how to pursue them (Cantor & Fleeson, 1991). Researchers (e.g. Ford, 1992, Heckhausen & Kuhl, 1985) believe that the extent to which a goal is prioritised and pursued in a given situation depends in part on the importance of that goal relative to the other goals under consideration. This suggests that the goal that is perceived as more important would be given the greater priority in a given situation.

Adolescents highly value social goals (e.g. Hicks & Townsend, 1993, Townsend, 1992). Although there has been a dearth of research directly examining the importance of social interaction goals, such as making friends, as compared to academic ones, a few studies have discovered, albeit indirectly that students place a greater priority on such social goals (Hicks & Townsend, 1993, Wentzel, 1989). Thus, research appears to indicate that students value social interaction goals more than academic ones. However it is not known whether students would value these social goals more when having to coordinate between them and academic goals.

Goal coordination strategies must also be considered within the temporal context in which such coordination is embedded. As task-directed activity is often highly structured with regard to time, temporal regulation of task pursuits becomes a key factor in goal pursuit decisions (Cantor & Fleeson, 1991). For students, such temporal contexts are central to their academic lives, as assignments, homework and exams are encroached within a limited time frame.

The temporal context, such as the urgency of an event, affects beliefs and action (e.g. Cantor & Fleeson, 1991, Darley & Batson, 1973). Individuals prioritize the goal perceived to be more urgent (Darley & Batson, 1973). This is consistent with Heckhausen and Kuhl's (1985) suggestion that the likelihood that a goal is attended to, or given greater priority in a particular situation, increases if that goal is perceived to be more urgent than the other competing goals. Thus goal urgency could influence which goal is pursued, by increasing or decreasing the strength of the goal a person wishes to pursue.

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Goal coordination strategies represent one way of coping with multiple goals. However, it is also possible to cope with multiple goals by abandoning one or more goals (Dodge et. al., 1989). As yet, it is not known whether and under what conditions students solve multiple goal conflicts by coordination or by abandonment.

It is also not known whether there are any gender and academic achievement differences in goal coordination. Wentzel found that students with higher grades reported pursuing academic related goals more, and social related goals less, than students with lower grades (Wentzel, 1989). Gender differences in academic and social goal pursuit are inconsistent. Wentzel (1989) found no gender differences in social and academic goal pursuit. However, other studies, using a slightly different definition of social interaction goal (social relationship goals) found that females endorse social relationship goals more than males (e.g. Hicks, 1996, Hicks & Murphy, 1995). As yet, we do not know whether there would be gender and academic achievement differences in goal pursuit and coordination, although it seems likely that high achievers will pursue academic related goals more than low achievers.

The aim of this research was threefold. Firstly, to examine the types of strategies adolescents use to coordinate their social and academic goals within different temporal contexts. It was expected that, across the different contexts, the preferred strategies would give a greater priority to social goals. The strength of that preference was expected to be influenced by the urgency of the goals.

Secondly, to examine whether the social goal would be perceived as more important than the academic one within the different temporal contexts. Across the different contexts, it was expected that the social goal would be perceived as more important than the academic one. Nonetheless, it was also expected that the urgency of the goal would have some influence on the perceived importance of the goals.

Finally, the study was designed to examine the effects of gender and academic achievement on goal coordination strategies and the perceived importance of the two goals.

METHOD

Subjects: The subjects were 151 senior high school students (75 male and 76 female) from two high schools in New Zealand. Participants were primarily of European (53%) or Asian (31%) descent, with a small proportion of the sample being Pacific Islanders or Maori (2% each). The remaining subjects' ethnic identifications were grouped together and reported as 'other'.

Instruments: Participants read four versions of a hypothetical scenario based on a dilemma involving a conflict between an academic goal (completing an assignment) and a social goal (going to a friend's birthday party). The four versions resulted from a factorial matrix in which the urgency of the academic and social goals were varied (both goals urgent, social goal urgent, academic goal urgent, both goals non-urgent). For each scenario, there were eight possible solutions to the dilemma. Solutions were based on four of Dodge's (1989) strategies for coordinating multiple goals (single integrative strategy, multiple simultaneous strategy, deferring goals strategy and modifying goals strategy), with the addition of a single goal strategy (found necessary in pilot work).

The 'deferring goals', 'modifying goals', and 'single goal pursuit' strategies were each presented in two forms (one favoring the academic goal and one favoring the social goal). Thus for example, the 'deferring goal' (social priority) strategy was presented as going to the party with friends and doing the assignment another day, whilst the 'deferring goal' (academic priority) strategy was presented as postponing the party with friends and doing the assignment that day. All solutions could be broadly classified as integrative (the solutions try to incorporate both social and academic goals) or non-integrative (the solutions abandon one goal in favor of the other). Participants rated (on a five point Likert scale) the likelihood of using each of the eight solutions to solve the hypothetical dilemma. After each scenario, participants were also asked to rate the relative importance of the social goal compared to the academic one. Finally, two questions on students' attitudes towards academic and social goals were included, where students were asked to indicate which goal they would perceive as more important in goal dilemma situations such as the ones described in the scenarios.

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Individual interviews were also conducted with a subgroup of the participants to explore goal coordination in greater depth and within a broader context. An interview schedule was developed which examined goal coordination strategies in non conflict and conflict situations. Issues pertaining to those goal coordination strategies, such as reasons for choosing particular goal coordination strategies, were also explored.

Procedure. All 151 students completed a questionnaire containing the four hypothetical scenarios and related questions on goal importance. Students were then divided into high, medium and low achievement (n=50 for each group) based on performance in the national exam, School Certificate, in the previous year. One student had not sat this examination and was dropped from any analysis involving academic achievement.

Interviews were conducted in each school a few days after the administration of the questionnaire. The participants were randomly selected to provide a sample in excess of 10% of those who had completed questionnaires, with the provision that there would be similar numbers of males and females, and a range of achievement levels. These students (n=20) were withdrawn individually from their classes, to participate in these interviews.

RESULTS

Strategy Preferences

To determine the types of strategies students preferred to use to solve the hypothetical scenarios, mean preference scores for each of the eight strategies were compared for each of the four scenarios. An inspection of the mean scores revealed that for all four scenarios, integrative strategies (strategies which coordinated rather than abandoned one of the goals) were the most popular strategies. The most popular method of solving the "academic goal urgent" scenarios was the 'single integrative strategy', (go to the whole party and do the assignment till late at night), whilst the most popular strategy to solve the "academic goal not urgent" scenarios was the 'deferring goal, social priority' strategy. (go to the party, and do the assignment another day). Mean preference scores for the most popular strategies ranged from 3.01 to 4.03 on a 5-point scale.

To investigate gender and academic achievement differences in strategy preference, scores for strategy preference were analyzed in a 3 (Achievement) x 2 (Gender) x 4 (Scenario) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The multivariate main effect for achievement was not significant ($p > .05$). There was a significant multivariate effect for gender in both scenarios where the social goal was not urgent. Inspection of the univariate effects for gender revealed significant effects on three strategies in the first of these scenarios, and two strategies in the second. However, with one exception all the strategies with significant gender effects were amongst those that were least preferred by students (e.g. multiple simultaneous strategy). For all five strategies males chose strategies that gave a greater priority to their social goals. Thus, gender effects were not apparent in the major strategies preferred by students in goal coordination.

Because academic achievement and gender effects could have been confounded by students' attitudes towards academic and social goals, an additional MANCOVA analysis was carried out with students' attitude scores towards these goals as covariates. For all four scenarios, the pattern of results was almost identical to the ones obtained in the MANOVA analysis. Thus, the preferred strategies of students are not influenced by their attitudes towards academic and social goals.

Goal importance

Across all four scenarios, social goals were perceived to be more important than academic ones. Scores for the four scenarios ranged from 2.8 to 3.6, where a score of 2.5 indicates that the academic goal is perceived to be as important as the social goal. The perception of social goals being more important than academic goals was more pronounced in the scenarios where the academic goals were not urgent (mean = 3.57 and 3.41) than where the academic goals were urgent (mean = 2.83 and 2.94).

To investigate gender and academic achievement differences in goal importance, scores for goal importance were analysed in a 3 (Achievement) x 2 (Gender) factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) for each scenario. Across the four scenarios, no significant two way interactions were found, nor were there significant main effects for achievement ($p > .05$). There was a significant main effect for gender in both scenarios where the

academic goal was urgent. For both scenarios, the mean score for males was higher than the mean score for females. Thus, males placed a greater importance on their social goals than females.

Because gender effects could have been confounded by students' attitudes towards academic and social goals, an additional MANCOVA analysis was carried out with students' attitude towards these goals as covariates. For all four scenarios, the pattern of results was almost identical to the ones obtained in the MANOVA analysis.

Interview results

Results of the interviews confirmed the major findings of the study. Students greatly valued social and academic goals, and preferred to use integrative strategies to solve conflict situations. The two most popular strategies students reported using were the same as the two most popular strategies used to solve the hypothetical scenarios ('single integrative strategy', 'deferring goal; social priority' strategy). Students were also found to use integrative strategies in non-conflict situations. Most students reported being satisfied with the effectiveness of their current strategies.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study support the expectation that students would prefer strategies that favor social goals, with the strength of that preference being influenced by the urgency of the two goals. When the academic goal is urgent students prefer strategies that favor both goals somewhat equally ('single integrative strategy'). When the academic goal is not urgent, students prefer strategies that favor the social goal ('deferring goal, social priority' strategy).

The results of the study also support the expectation that students would perceive the social goal as more important than the academic one, with the strength of that preference being influenced by the urgency of the two goals. When the academic goal is not urgent, students perceive the social goal to be much more important than the academic goal.

When the academic goal is urgent, the social goal is perceived to be only slightly more important than the academic one.

These findings indicate that the preferred method for solving conflicts between social and academic goals is to coordinate both goals rather than choose between them. This suggests that students want to achieve both academic and social goals. However, despite the fact students want to achieve both goals, they perceive the social goal as more important than the academic one. Their preferences for certain goal coordination strategies reflect this fact, as the most preferred strategies are those which either favor social goals over academic ones, or favor social goals as much as academic ones. This implies two things. Firstly, students take into account the importance of the conflicting goals when deciding which goal coordination strategy they would prefer to use. Secondly, students prefer goal coordination strategies that would enable them to fulfill their more important goal, namely their social goal.

When deciding on a preferred goal coordination strategy, students also appear to take into account the appropriateness of the strategy to their particular goal conflict situation. Certain strategies (e.g. 'single integrative strategy') are consistently preferred whilst others (e.g. 'multiple simultaneous strategy') are consistently disliked. As the 'multiple simultaneous strategy' is most effective when one of the goals requires little attention (Dodge et. al., 1989), it is not the most appropriate for solving the hypothetical conflict between the party and the assignment (both of which require active attention). Thus, it appears that students have some knowledge of the appropriateness of certain goal coordination strategies. Further research is needed on students' understanding of appropriate strategies for solving dilemmas, and how this understanding influences the goal coordination strategies that they initiate.

Preferences for certain goal coordination strategies, and perceptions of social and academic goal importance appear to be influenced by the urgency of the academic goal, rather than the urgency of the social goal. When the academic goal is urgent, students change their preferences for certain goal coordination strategies, and change their perceptions of social and academic goal importance. This implies that the urgency of the

academic goal plays a greater role in influencing strategy choice and perceptions of goal importance than the urgency of the social goal. Although it is likely that the demand characteristics of school (reinforced by parental expectations) are implicated in the academic urgency effect, further research exploring the dynamics of the relationship is needed.

The results of the study were not influenced by academic achievement, and only minimally influenced by gender (although males appeared to value social goals more than females, and were more likely to prefer strategies that favor social goals). These findings suggest that all students, regardless of their level of academic achievement or gender, prefer similar goal coordination strategies, and desire to achieve both social and academic goals, with a greater importance placed on social goals. This does not necessarily mean that aspects of preferences for goal coordination strategies and perceptions of goal importance are not influenced by gender or academic achievement differences. There are other aspects of the goal coordination process, such as perceptions of ability to satisfy both goals, which could be influenced by gender and academic achievement. Further research is needed to determine the relationship between academic achievement, gender and goal coordination.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that a true understanding of student motivation can only be gained when there is an understanding of the wider social context by which goals associated with academic achievement are embedded.

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